



Child Welfare Information Gateway

PROTECTING CHILDREN ■ STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

NUMBERS
AND TRENDS

July 2005

Foster Care

To find out more about foster care statistics in your State, refer to *Child Welfare Outcomes*, an annual report published by the Children's Bureau. The most recent version of *Child Welfare Outcomes* is available online from the Children's Bureau at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#cw

Print copies are available from Child Welfare Information Gateway by calling 800.394.3366 or emailing info@childwelfare.gov.

Introduction

Foster care is defined in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR)¹ as "24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes." Foster care settings include, but are not limited to, nonrelative foster family homes, relative foster homes (whether payments are being made or not), group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, and pre-adoptive homes.

This factsheet provides the most recent national statistical estimates for children in foster care from fiscal year (FY) 2003 and also provides earlier data from FY 1998² to allow for some

¹ Title 45, Volume 4, Part 1355, Section 57. The CFR citation can be accessed online at <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/get-cfr.cgi?TITL=45&PART=1355&SECTION=57&TYPE=TEXT>.

² 1998 was chosen as the baseline year because it is the first year in which 85 percent of all States/jurisdictions submitted AFCARS.

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Administration on Children, Youth and Families
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estimate of trends over time. Data were obtained from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS collects case-level information on all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care, or supervision and on children who are adopted under the auspices of the State's public child welfare agency.

The data presented for FY 2003 are from *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2003 Estimates as of April 2005* (10) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005a). The data presented for FY 1998 are from *The AFCARS Report: Interim Estimates for Fiscal Year 1998—April 2000* (3) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

For more information on AFCARS, visit the Children's Bureau website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/systems/afcars/about.htm>. Reports are available online at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/index.htm#afcars.

Within each section, data estimates are presented for three timeframes detailed below; however, data are not available or appropriate for all timeframes for all variables:

- **Point in Time** refers to information about the population of children in foster care on a given day, specifically, September 30, the end of the Federal fiscal year.
- **Entries** refer to information about children entering foster care during a given timeframe, specifically, October 1 through September 30 of the Federal fiscal year.
- **Exits** refer to information about children exiting foster care during a given timeframe, specifically, October 1 through September 30 of the Federal fiscal year.

Some percentages do not add up to 100 percent and/or the estimated numbers do not add up to the total number in the category due to rounding of the original AFCARS source data and to missing data.

Placement Statistics

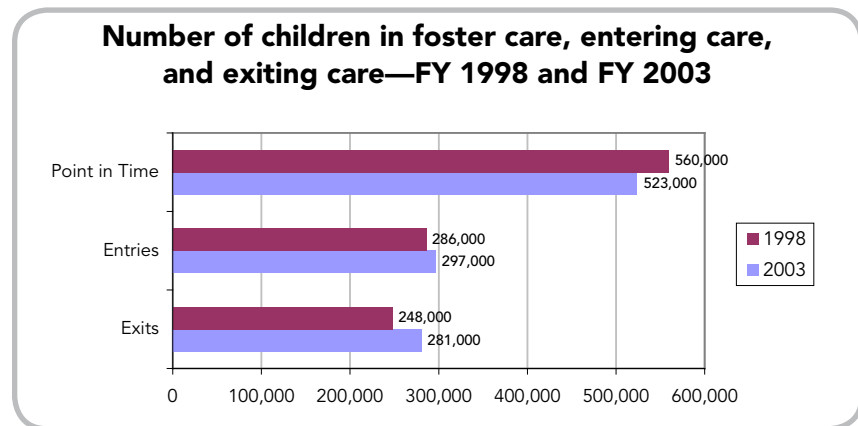
Children In, Entering, and Exiting Care

Point in Time. As of September 30, 2003, there were an estimated 523,000 children in foster care.

Entries. During FY 2003, 297,000 children entered foster care.

Exits. During FY 2003, 281,000 children exited foster care.

Trends. Between FY 1998 and FY 2003, the number of children in care as of September 30 dropped slightly, while entries into and exits from foster care during those years increased slightly.

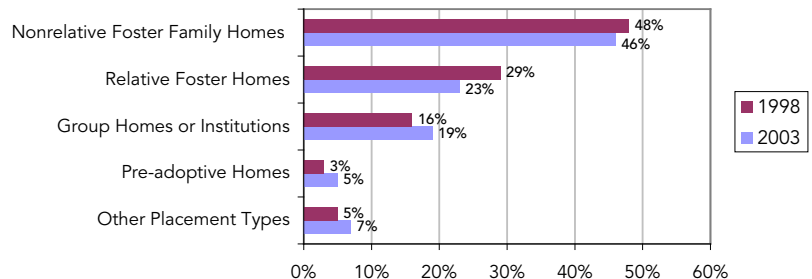


Placement Types

Point in Time. Of the estimated 523,000 children in foster care as of September 30, 2003, 46 percent were in nonrelative foster family homes, 23 percent were in relative foster homes, 19 percent were in group homes or institutions, 5 percent were in pre-adoptive homes, and 7 percent were in other placement types.

Trends. Placement type as of September 30 remained relatively unchanged between FY 1998 and FY 2003. Placement in relative foster homes showed the largest change, dropping 6 percentage points.

Placement types for children in foster care on September 30—1998 and 2003

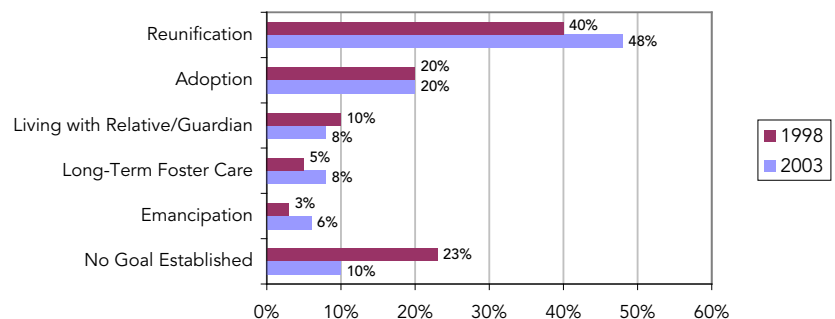


Permanency Goals

Point in Time. Of the estimated 523,000 children in foster care as of September 30, 2003, 48 percent had a goal of reunification with parent(s) or principal caregiver(s), 20 percent had a goal of adoption, 8 percent had a goal of living with a relative or guardian, 8 percent had a goal of long-term foster care, 6 percent had a goal of emancipation,³ and 10 percent had not yet had a permanency goal established.

Trends. The most dramatic change between FY 1998 and FY 2003 occurred in the proportion of children in the “No Goal Established” category, which posted a decrease of 13 percentage points. Also of note was an 8 percent increase in children with a goal of reunification.

Permanency goals for children in foster care on September 30—1998 and 2003

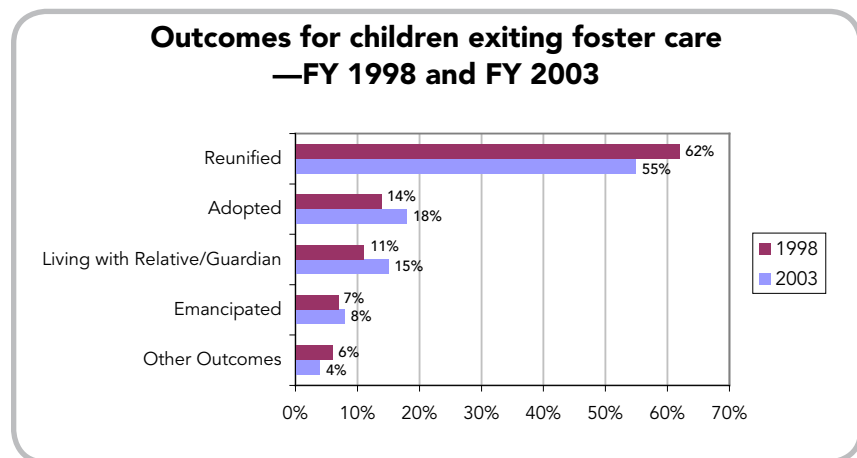


³ Emancipation refers to aging out and leaving the foster care system; this occurs between the ages of 18 and 21, depending on State policy.

Outcomes

Exits. Of the estimated 281,000 children who exited foster care during FY 2003, 55 percent were reunified with parent(s) or primary caretaker(s), 18 percent were adopted, 15 percent went to live with a relative or guardian, 8 percent were emancipated, and 4 percent had other outcomes.⁴

Trends. The percentage of children adopted increased by 4 percent, while the percentage of children reunified with family decreased by 7 percent between FY 1998 and FY 2003. Overall, the percentage of children exiting foster care to a permanent family (i.e., reunification, adoption, or living with relative/guardian) remained about the same between the two periods.



Length of Stay

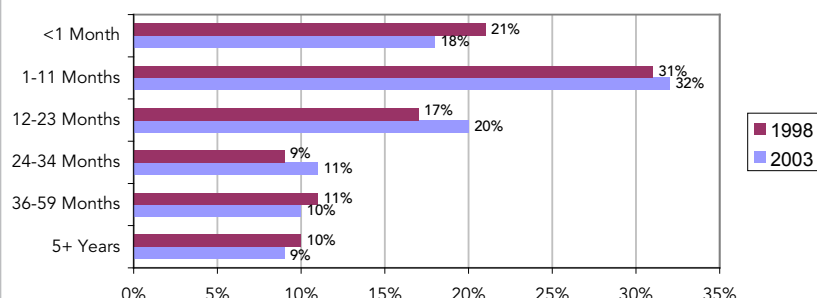
Exits. Of the estimated 281,000 children who exited foster care during FY 2003, 18 percent had been in care less than 1 month, 32 percent had been in care for 1 to 11 months, 20 percent had been in care for 12 to 23 months, 11 percent had been in care for 24 to 35 months, 10 percent had been in care for 36 to 59 months, and 9 percent had been in care for 5 or more years.

Trends. The time children spent in foster care changed little between FY 1998 and FY 2003. The median length of stay was 11 months in FY 1998 and 11.9 months in FY 2002.

⁴ Other outcomes include being transferred to another agency, runaways, and death.

Descriptive Information

**Length of stay for children exiting foster care
—FY 1998 and FY 2003**



Age

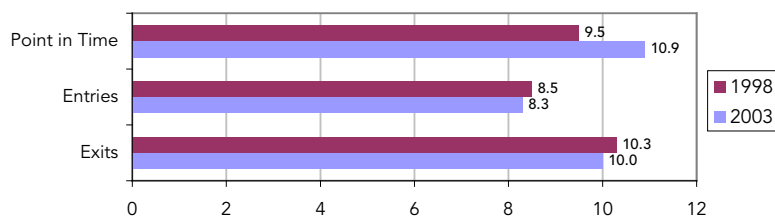
Point in Time. The median⁵ age of the children in foster care on September 30, 2003, was 10.9 years.

Entries. The median age of children entering foster care during FY 2003 was 8.3 years.

Exits. The median age of children exiting foster care during FY 2003 was 10.0 years.

Trends. The age at entry and exit stayed relatively stable between FY 1998 and FY 2003, while the median age of all children in care at a given point in time increased by 1.4 years.

**Median age of children in foster care, entering care,
and exiting care—FY 1998 and FY 2003**

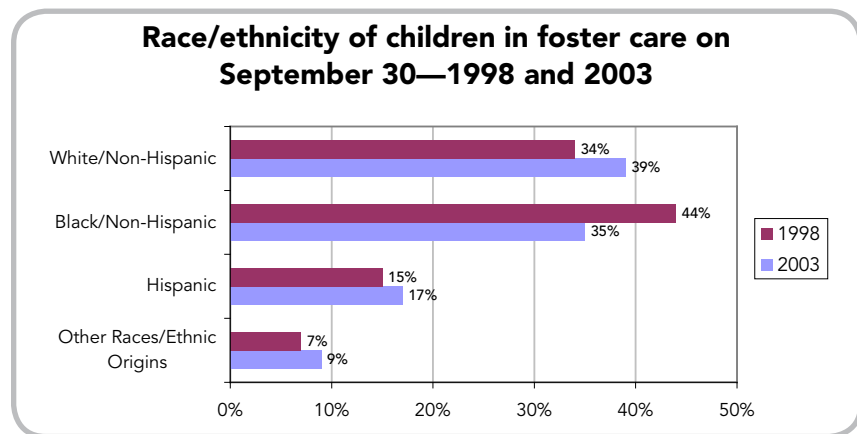


⁵ The median refers to the number in the middle when all numbers are placed in order. In this case, it means that an equal number of children are older and younger than this age.

Race/Ethnicity

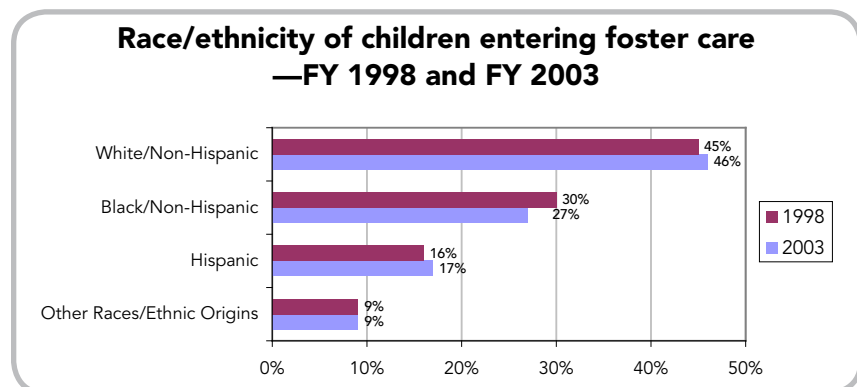
Point in Time. Of the estimated 523,000 children in foster care as of September 30, 2003, 39 percent were White/Non-Hispanic, 35 percent were Black/Non-Hispanic, 17 percent were Hispanic, and 9 percent were other races/ethnic origins.⁶

Trends. The percentage of Black/Non-Hispanic children in care as of September 30 dropped 9 percentage points (from 44 to 35 percent) between FY 1998 and FY 2003, while percentages for all other race/ethnicity categories increased slightly.

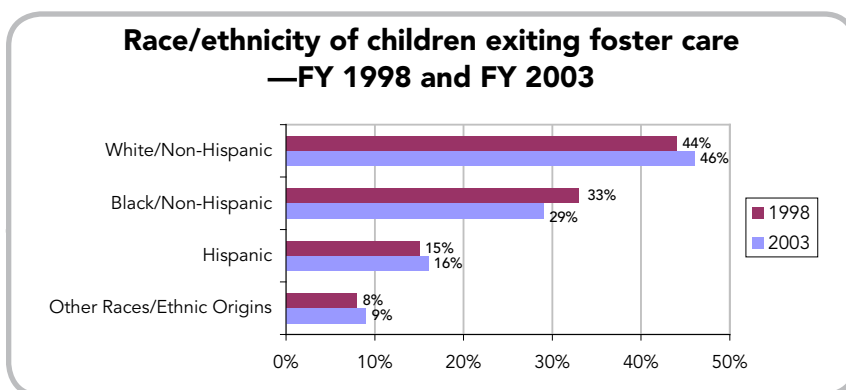


Entries. Of the estimated 297,000 children who entered foster care during FY 2003, 46 percent were White/Non-Hispanic, 27 percent were Black/Non-Hispanic, 17 percent were Hispanic, and 9 percent were other races/ethnic origins.

Trends. The racial composition of children entering foster care stayed relatively stable between FY 1998 and FY 2003.



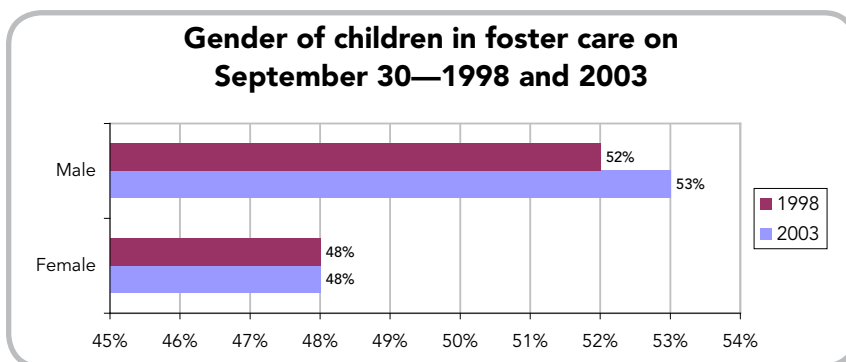
⁶ Using U.S. Bureau of Census standards, children of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Beginning in FY 2000, children could be identified with more than one race designation.



Gender

Point in Time. Of the estimated 523,000 children in foster care as of September 30, 2003, 53 percent were male and 48 percent were female.

Trends. Gender demographics were basically unchanged between FY 1998 and FY 2003.



Other Information

Reentries

According to *Child Welfare Outcomes 2002: Annual Report*, a median of 9.9 percent of children who entered foster care in FY 2002 were reentering the system within 12 months of a previous discharge (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005c).

Abuse and Neglect by Foster Parents

As reported in *Child Maltreatment 2003*, 0.5 percent of the perpetrators of abuse or neglect were foster parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005b).

Cost

The Urban Institute estimates that in FY 2002, total spending (Federal, State, and local) for out-of-home care was at least \$10 billion (Scarcella et al., 2004).

References

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